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Ottoman Empire

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WHEN Jane Eyre advises Rochester to go "to the bazaars of Stamboul without delay" if he is in search of a submissive wife, and immediately begins to plot a mutiny in Rochester's future harem wherein she herself will "preach liberty to them that are enslaved," Charlotte Brontë does little more than reinstate the well-worn tropes of an already established Orientalism: the Ottoman Empire is the exotic, gendered, sexualized land of the imaginary "Other," ready to represent whatever desires and anxieties Europe would project onto it.[1]

Nevertheless, the Ottoman Empire was not simply a discursive construct but a real entity with which Britain had intense political, economic, and cultural relations in the nineteenth century: they were political allies during the Crimean War and various Balkan independence movements. Simultaneously, all throughout the Victorian period, they competed for the control of diverse geographies from Egypt to Cyprus and Iraq.[2] Disraeli drew much criticism for his support of the Ottoman cause against Bulgaria;[3] Florence Nightingale gained recognition through her work in Istanbul; the famous Battle of Balaclava, which inspired Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade," began with the sound of Ottoman guns firing. Many Ottoman cultural institutions, such as the Ottoman Imperial Museum, were modeled after their British counterparts. At the same time, a large number of Ottoman treasures, from the so-called Elgin Marbles to Assyrian reliefs from Nineveh, made their way—through archaeological excavations, purchase, and looting—from the Ottoman Empire to Britain.[4]

Although most of these processes, events, and facts are well documented in the scholarship, Ottomans still do not constitute an active area of research for Victorian studies. As Edward Said and Linda Nochlin both argued, the Ottoman Empire continues to remain an imagined Other ("the Orient"), rather than an actual political, economic, and cultural entity in literary scholarship.[5] Even when Orientalism constitutes

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the explicit subject matter of scholarship, its gaze is directed toward Britain and how British writers and artists represented the Orient.[6]

Meanwhile, most studies of British imperialism in the nineteenth century turn to former colonies, such as India and South Africa, to understand how the empire functioned globally. However, though never formally a colony, the Ottoman Empire was de facto run by the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (1881–1923), an organization comprising representatives from Britain, France, Italy, and other European creditors.[7] In other words, the Ottoman Empire was as much subject to policies of British imperialism as were most of its colonies, even though it continues to remain largely invisible in Victorian studies.

The field of Victorian studies is already in a state of reckoning: a special issue of *Victorian Studies* calls for an "undisciplining" of Victorian studies by rethinking how the field understands issues of race, colonialism, and Orientalism as well as its privileged geographies and Eurocentrism.[8] The 2018 "Keywords" issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* shows some of the ways in which the field can be reenergized: articles on the Caribbean, imperialism, the transimperial, and settler colonialism all urge productive ways of redrawing the borders of the field.[9] Recent work involving Latin America and Britain's informal empire also widens the scope of what we talk about when we talk about "the Victorian."[10]

This article joins in this tradition and argues for the greater integration of Ottoman sources into our understanding of Victorian Britain. We already have excellent accounts of how the British press represented the Crimean War, for instance, or how the Oriental woman is represented in British fiction and travelogues. But how did the Ottoman press represent the same war? What did the Ottomans think of their British allies? How is the British woman represented in Ottoman fiction, or how did Ottoman fiction respond to the problem of its representation in the British imaginary? Jane Eyre's account of submissive Ottoman wives would look even more dubious when read side by side with Fatma Aliye's *Women of Islam* (*Nisvan-ı İslam*; 1891–92), a book she penned specifically to correct Western women's mistaken assumptions about Ottoman women and polygamy.[11] Or Ömer Seyfettin's short story "Secret Sanctuary" (1919), about a Western traveler who arrives in Istanbul in search of an "Oriental experience," and who ends up mistaking the pots laid out to collect rainwater for some mystic religious totem, could do much to ironize the popular European travelogues.[12] Scholars who situate themselves in Ottoman studies already do a great deal of productive

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cross-cultural work, and it is time for greater dialogue between them and scholars of the Victorian era.[13]

Notes

1. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, Norton Critical Edition, 4th ed. (1847; New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), 242.
2. Robert L. Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); George Francis Hill, *The Ottoman Province: The British Colony, 1571–1948*, edited by Harry Luke, vol. 4 of *A History of Cyprus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940); Gökhan Çetinsaya, "Challenges of a Frontier Region: The Case of Ottoman Iraq in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Frontiers of the Ottoman World*, edited by A. C. S. Peacock (London: British Academy, 2009), 271–87.
3. Paul Laity, "1876–1880: The Peace Movement and the Eastern Question," in *The British Peace Movement, 1870–1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 63–87.
4. Robert G. Ousterhout et al., *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914* (Istanbul: SALT, 2011).
5. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, Icon Editions (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).
6. This was of course Said's own methodology, but more recent scholarship also follows in his steps. See, for example, Andrew Warren, *The Orient and the Young Romantics*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), and Filiz Turhan, *The Other Empire: British Romantic Writings about the Ottoman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2003).
7. Mehmet Hakan Sağlam, *Osmanlı Borç Yönetimi Düyun-ı Umumiyye 1879–1891*, 4 vols. (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2007).
8. Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, "Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies," *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 3 (2020): 369–91.
9. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 46, nos. 3—4 (2018), specifically Tim Watson, "Caribbean," 601–4; Patrick Brantlinger, "Imperialism,"

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735–39; Sukanya Banerjee, "Transimperial," 925–28; Melissa Free, "Settler Colonialism," 876–82.

10. Jessie Reeder, *The Forms of Informal Empire: Britain, Latin America, and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).
11. Fatma Aliye Hanım, *Nisvan-ı İslam,* edited by Hülya Argunşah (Istanbul: Kesit Yayınları, 2012).
12. Ömer Seyfettin, "Secret Sanctuary," in *Europe Knows Nothing about the Orient: A Critical Discourse from the East, 1872–1932*, edited by Zeynep Çelik, 1st ed. (Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2020).
13. See, for instance, Zeynep Çelik, *Europe Knows Nothing.*

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